Stephen T. Mather, Superintendent's Conference, October 1925, Mesa Verde National Park

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

A Brief History

Barry Mackintosh 1999

Any account of the National Park Service must begin with the parks that preceded it and prompted its creation.

The national park concept is generally credited to the artist George Catlin. On a trip to the Dakotas in 1832, he worried about the impact of America's westward expansion on Indian civilization, wildlife, and wilderness. They might be preserved, he wrote, ãby some great protecting policy of government... in a magnificent park.... A nation's park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!ä

Catlin's vision was partly realized in 1864, when Congress donated Yosemite Valley to California for preservation as a state park. Eight years later, in 1872, Congress reserved the spectacular Yellowstone country in the Wyoming and Montana territories ãas a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.ä With no state government there yet to receive and manage it, Yellowstone remained in the custody of the U.S. Department of the Interior as a national park÷the world's first area so designated.

Congress followed the Yellowstone precedent with other national parks in the 1890s and early 1900s, including Sequoia, Yosemite (to which California returned Yosemite Valley), Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, and Glacier. The idealistic impulse to preserve nature was often joined by the pragmatic desire to promote tourism: western railroads lobbied for many of the early parks and built grand rustic hotels in them to boost their passenger business.

The late nineteenth century also saw growing interest in preserving prehistoric Indian ruins and artifacts on the public lands. Congress first moved to protect such a feature, Arizona's Casa Grande Ruin, in 1889. In 1906 it created Mesa Verde National Park, containing dramatic cliff dwellings in southwestern Colorado, and passed the Antiquities Act authorizing presidents to set aside ãhistoric and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interestä in federal custody as national monuments. Theodore Roosevelt used the act to proclaim 18 national monuments before he left the presidency. They included not only cultural features like El Morro, New Mexico, site of prehistoric petroglyphs and historic inscriptions, but natural features like Arizona's Petrified Forest and Grand Canyon. Congress later converted many of these natural monuments to national parks.

By 1916 the Interior Department was responsible for 14 national parks and 21 national monuments but had no organization to manage them. Interior secretaries had asked the Army to detail troops to Yellowstone and the California parks for this purpose. There military engineers and cavalrymen developed park roads and buildings, enforced regulations against hunting, grazing, timber cutting, and vandalism, and did their best to serve the visiting public. Civilian appointees superintended the other

parks, while the monuments received minimal custody. In the absence of an effective central administration, those in charge operated without coordinated supervision or policy guidance.

The parks were also vulnerable to competing interests, including some within the ascendent conservation movement. Utilitarian conservationists favoring regulated use rather than strict preservation of natural resources advocated the construction of dams by public authorities for water supply, power, and irrigation purposes. When San Francisco sought to dam Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley for a reservoir after the turn of the century, the utilitarian and preservationist wings of the conservation movement came to blows. Over the passionate opposition of John Muir and other park supporters, Congress in 1913 permitted the dam, which historian John Ise later called ãthe worst disaster ever to come to any national park.ä

Hetch Hetchy highlighted the institutional weakness of the park movement. While utilitarian conservation had become well represented in government by the U.S. Geological Survey and the Forest and Reclamation services, no comparable bureau spoke for park preservation in Washington. Among those recognizing the problem was Stephen T. Mather, a wealthy and well-connected Chicago businessman. When Mather complained to Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane about the parks' mismanagement, Lane invited him to Washington as his assistant for park matters. Twenty-five-year-old Horace M. Albright became Mather's principal aide upon Mather's arrival in 1915.

Crusading for a national parks bureau, Mather and Albright effectively blurred the distinction between utilitarian conservation and preservation by emphasizing the economic value of parks as tourist meccas. A vigorous public relations campaign led to supportive articles in National Geographic, The Saturday Evening Post, and other popular magazines. Mather hired his own publicist and obtained funds from 17 western railroads to produce The National Parks Portfolio, a lavishly illustrated publication sent to congressmen and other influential citizens.

Congress responded as desired, and on August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson approved legislation creating the National Park Service within the Interior Department. The act made the bureau responsible for Interior's national parks and monuments, Hot Springs Reservation in Arkansas (made a national park in 1921), and ãsuch other national parks and reservations of like character as may be hereafter created by Congress.ä In managing these areas, the Park Service was directed ãto conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.ä

Secretary Lane named Mather the Park Service's first director and Albright assistant director. A policy letter Lane approved in 1918 elaborated on the bureau's dual mission of conserving park resources and providing for their enjoyment. While reemphasizing the primacy of preservation, it reflected Mather's and Albright's conviction that more visitors must be attracted and accommodated if the parks were to flourish. Automobiles, not permitted in Yellowstone until 1915, would be allowed throughout the system. Hotels would be provided by concessionaires. Museums, publications, and other educational activities were encouraged as well.

The policy letter also sought to guide the system's expansion. ãIn studying new park projects, you should seek to find scenery of supreme and distinctive quality or some natural feature so extraordinary or unique as to be of national interest and importance,ä it directed. ãThe national park system as now constituted should not be lowered in standard, dignity, and prestige by the inclusion of areas which express in less than the highest terms the particular class or kind of exhibit which they represent.ä

Through the 1920s the national park system was really a western park system. Only Acadia National Park in Maine lay east of the Mississippi. The West was home to America's most spectacular natural scenery, and most land there was federally owned and thus subject to park or monument reservation without purchase. If the system were to benefit more people and maximize its support in Congress, however, it would have to expand eastward. In 1926 Congress authorized Shenandoah, Great Smoky Mountains, and Mammoth Cave national parks in the Appalachian region but required that their lands be donated. With the aid of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and other philanthropists, the states involved gradually acquired and turned over most of the land needed for these parks in the next decade.

But the Park Service's greatest opportunity in the East lay in another realm÷that of history and historic sites. Congress had directed the War Department to preserve a number of historic battlefields, forts, and memorials there as national military parks and monuments, beginning in 1890 with Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park in Georgia and Tennessee. After succeeding Mather as director in 1929, Albright was instrumental in getting Congress to establish three new historical parks in the East

under Park Service administration. Colonial National Monument, Virginia, which included Yorktown Battlefield, and Morristown National Historical Park, New Jersey, the site of Revolutionary War encampments, edged the Park Service into the War Department's domain.

Soon after Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, Albright accompanied the new president on a trip to Shenandoah National Park and mentioned his desire to acquire all the military parks. Roosevelt agreed and directed Albright to initiate an executive transfer order. Under the order, effective August 10, 1933, the Park Service received not only the War Department's parks and monuments but the 15 national monuments then held by the Forest Service as well as the national capital parks, including the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, and White House. The addition of nearly 50 historical areas in the East made the park system and Park Service truly national and deeply involved with historic as well as natural preservation.

As Roosevelt launched his New Deal, the Park Service received another mission: depression relief. Under its supervision the Civilian Conservation Corps employed thousands of young men in numerous conservation, rehabilitation, and construction projects in both the national and state parks. The program had a lasting impact on the Park Service. Many professionals hired under its auspices remained on the bureau's rolls as career employees, and regional offices established to coordinate CCC work in the state parks evolved into a permanent regional system for park administration.

During the 1930s the Park Service also became involved with areas intended primarily for mass recreation. Begun as depression relief projects, the Blue Ridge Parkway between Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains national parks and the Natchez Trace Parkway between Nashville, Tennessee, and Natchez, Mississippi, were designed for scenic recreational motoring. In 1936, under an agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation, the Park Service assumed responsibility for recreational development and activities at the vast reservoir created by Hoover Dam. Lake Mead National Recreation Area, as it was later titled, was the first of several reservoir areas in the park system. In 1937 Congress authorized Cape Hatteras National Seashore, the first of several seashore and lakeshore areas.

Albright left the Park Service for private business in 1933 and was succeeded by his able associate director, Arno B. Cammerer. Newton B. Drury, who had directed the Save-the-Redwoods League in California, followed Cammerer in 1940. America's entry into World War II a year later forced Drury to preside over a drastic retrenchment in Park Service activity and defend the parks against pressures for consumptive uses in the name of national defense. Timber interests sought Sitka spruce in Olympic National Park for airplane manufacture. Ranchers and mining companies pressed to open other parks to grazing and prospecting. Scrap drive leaders eyed historic cannon at the Park Service's battlefields and forts. Drury successfully resisted most such demands, which eased as needed resources were found elsewhere.

The postwar era brought new pressures on the parks as the nation's energies were redirected to domestic pursuits. Bureau of Reclamation plans to dam wilderness canyons in Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado and Utah touched off a conservation battle recalling Hetch Hetchy. Interior Secretary Oscar L. Chapman's decision to support the project contributed to Drury's resignation in March 1951. But this time the park preservationists won: Congress finally declined to approve the Dinosaur dams.

Conrad L. Wirth, a landscape architect and planner who had led the Park Service's CCC program, became director in December 1951. Facing a park system with a deteriorating infrastructure overwhelmed by the postwar travel boom, he responded with Mission 66, a ten-year, billion-dollar program to upgrade facilities, staffing, and resource management by the bureau's fiftieth anniversary in 1966. A hallmark of Mission 66 was the park visitor center, a multiple-use facility with interpretive exhibits, audiovisual programs, and other public services. By 1960, 56 visitor centers were open or under construction in parks from Antietam National Battlefield Site, Maryland, to Zion National Park, Utah.

Mission 66 development, criticized by some as overdevelopment, nevertheless fell short of Wirth's goals÷in large part because the Park Service's domain kept expanding, diverting funds and staff to new areas. Congress added more than 50 parks to the system during the ten-year period, from Virgin Islands National Park to Point Reyes National Seashore in California. Expansion continued apace under George B. Hartzog, Jr., who had superintended the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis before succeeding Wirth in 1964. Under his leadership through 1972, the Park Service and system branched out in several new directions.

Natural resource management was restructured along ecological lines following a 1963 report by a committee of scientists chaired by A. Starker Leopold. ãAs a primary goal, we would recommend that the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man,ä the Leopold Report declared. ãA national park should represent a vignette of primitive America.ä Environmental interpretation, emphasizing ecological relationships, and special environmental education programs for school classes reflected and promoted the nation's growing environmental awareness.

ãLiving historyä programs became popular attractions at many historical parks, ranging from frontier military demonstrations at Fort Davis National Historic Site, Texas, to period farming at Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, Indiana. The Park Service's historical activities expanded beyond the parks as well. Responding to the destructive effects of urban renewal, highway construction, and other federal projects during the postwar era, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 authorized the bureau to maintain a comprehensive National Register of Historic Places. Listed properties÷publicly and privately owned, locally as well as nationally significant÷would receive special consideration in federal project planning and federal grants and technical assistance to encourage their preservation.

Several new types of parks joined the system during the Hartzog years. Ozark National Scenic Riverways in Missouri, authorized by Congress in 1964, foreshadowed the comprehensive Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, which led to the acquisition of other free-flowing rivers. On the Great Lakes, Pictured Rocks and Indiana Dunes became the first national lakeshores in 1966. The National Trails System Act of 1968 made the Park Service responsible for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, running some 2,000 miles from Maine to Georgia. Gateway National Recreation Area in New York City and Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco, both established in 1972, were precedents for other national recreation areas serving metropolitan Cleveland, Atlanta, and Los Angeles.

During the bicentennial of the American Revolution in the mid-1970s, the two dozen historical parks commemorating the Revolution benefited from another big development program. At Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia the Park Service reconstructed the house where Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, installed elaborate exhibits at the site of Benjamin Franklin's house, and moved the Liberty Bell to a new pavilion outside Independence Hall. On July 4, 1976, President Gerald R. Ford, once a seasonal ranger at Yellowstone, spoke at Independence Hall and signed legislation making Valley Forge a national historical park.

Four years later, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 more than doubled the size of the national park system by adding over 47 million wilderness acres. The largest of the new areas in Alaska, WrangellöSt. Elias National Park, comprises more than 8,300,000 acres, while the adjoining WrangellöSt. Elias National Preserve comprises nearly 4,900,000. Together they cover an area larger than New Hampshire and Vermont combined and contain the continent's greatest array of glaciers and peaks above 16,000 feet. The national preserve designation was applied to ten of the new Alaska areas because they allowed certain activities, like sport hunting and trapping, not permitted in national parks.

Russell E. Dickenson, a former park ranger and manager, took the helm in 1980. Because the Park Service's funding and staffing had not kept pace with its growing responsibilities, Dickenson sought to slow the park system's expansion. The Reagan administration and the Congress that took office with it in 1981 were of like mind. Rather than creating more parks they backed Dickenson's Park Restoration and Improvement Program, which allocated more than a billion dollars over five years to resources and facilities in existing parks.

William Penn Mott, Jr., a landscape architect who had directed California's state parks when Ronald Reagan was governor, followed Dickenson in 1985. Deeply interested in interpretation, Mott sought a greater Park Service role in educating the public about American history and environmental values. He also returned the bureau to a more expansionist posture, supporting such additions as Great Basin National Park, Nevada, and Steamtown National Historic Site, a railroad collection in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Steamtown, championed by Scranton's congressman for its local economic benefits, was a costly venture much criticized as an example of ãpark barrelä politics, but Mott was convinced of its educational potential.

James M. Ridenour, formerly head of Indiana's Department of Natural Resources, served as director during the Bush administration (1989ö1993). Doubting the national significance of Steamtown and other proposed parks driven by economic development interests, he spoke out against the ãthinning of the bloodä of the national park system and sought to regain the initiative from Congress in charting its

expansion. He also worked to achieve a greater financial return to the Park Service from park concessions. In 1990 the Richard King Mellon Foundation made the largest single park donation yet: $10.5 million for additional lands at the Antietam, Gettysburg, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg Civil War battlefields, Pecos National Historical Park, and Shenandoah National Park.

Roger G. Kennedy, who had directed the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History, was the Clinton administration's choice to head the Park Service in 1993. Like Mott, he was especially concerned about expanding the bureau's educational role and sought to enlarge its presence beyond the parks via the Internet. His tenure coincided with a government-wide effort to restructure and downsize the federal bureaucracy, which accelerated after the Republicans took control of Congress in 1995. The Park Service restructured its field operations and embarked on a course of reducing its Washington and regional office staffs by 40 percent.

In 1997 Robert Stanton became the first career Park Service employee since Dickenson to head the bureau. Beginning as a ranger, he had most recently served as regional director of the National Capital Region. An African American, Stanton took particular interest in increasing the diversity of the Park Service to better serve minority populations.

As of 1999 the national park system comprises 379 areas in nearly every state and U.S. possession. In addition to managing these parks÷as diverse and far-flung as Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and the Statue of Liberty National Monument÷the Park Service supports the preservation of natural and historic places and promotes outdoor recreation outside the system through a range of grant and technical assistance programs. Major emphasis is placed on cooperation and partnerships with other government bodies, foundations, corporations, and other private parties to protect the parks and other significant properties and advance Park Service programs.

Public opinion surveys have consistently rated the National Park Service among the most popular federal agencies. The high regard in which the national parks and their custodians are held augurs well for philanthropic, corporate, and volunteer support, present from the beginnings of the national park movement but never more vital to its prosperity.

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